

AUGUSTINE ON WHAT IT MEANS TO LOVE GOD: THOUGHTS ON LOVE AS DELIGHTING, NOT JUST ACTING AND WILLING

Chapter 67 of *Taste & See* by John Piper

What is love to God? Some reduce it to doing things in obedience to God because John 14: 15 says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” But that is not what the text says. It says that obedience will *result from* love. It does not say that obedience *is* love. Nor does 1 John 5:3 contradict this when it says, “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments,” because the next phrase is to be taken with it: “and His commandments are not burdensome.” In other words, love is not just the doing but the doing from a certain kind of heart that makes the doing “not burdensome.”

Others reduce it to acts of willpower or decisions. The reason usually given for this reduction is that love is commanded in the Bible, and people say that if is commanded, you have to be able to do it no matter how you feel. In other words, since love is commanded (Matthew 22:37), then it must be a decision, not anything deeper and outside our immediate control like an affection or emotion.

But the problem with this reasoning is that it contradicts the Bible. Lots of things are commanded in the Bible that are not mere decisions and are indeed outside our immediate control. For example, joy is commanded (Psalm 100:2; Philippians 4:4); as are hope (Psalm 42:5), fear (Luke 12:5), zeal (Romans 12:11), grief (James 4:9), desire (1 Peter 2:2), tenderheartedness (Ephesians 4:32), brokenness and contrition (Psalm 51:17), brotherly affection (Rom 12:10), and gratitude (Colossians 3:15).

It simply is not true that if something is commanded, it must be a simple act of will lying in our power to do it. This, of course, is offensive to people who deny the deadening effects of original sin. But for those who believe that original sin brought a horrendous hardness and deadness and moral blindness to the human race, then it is not so surprising that the commands of God come to people who cannot simply do them by their own power. Our will is morally and spiritually flawed. Nevertheless we are responsible to do the commandments of God. The moral corruption that cripples us does not relieve us of our responsibility to do what it is right and good to do. “Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, ‘You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear’” (Deuteronomy 29:2, 4). Seeing they did nor see. Nevertheless, in spite of this moral blindness and deafness, Israel was responsible to “keep the words of this covenant to do them” (verse 9).

So what then is love to God if not mere action or mere willpower? Here is the way St. Augustine defined it over sixteen hundred years ago: “I call [love to God] the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for his own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s self and of one’s

neighbor for the sake of God” (*On Christian Doctrine*, iii, x, 16). That, I think, is a very good definition. Unlike the other two definitions suggested above, *delight in God* is at the heart of the definition.

This definition accounts for the many texts that summon us not just to obey the Lord or make decisions for the Lord, but to delight in the Lord. “Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). “Rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 4:4). “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1-2). “O God, you are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Thus I have seen you in the sanctuary, to see your power and your glory. Because your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise you” (Psalm 63:1-3). “Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy” (Psalm 43:4). “Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:18).

What, then, was this “motion of the soul” which is called love to God, in the life of Augustine? Here is one of his many answers:

But what do I love when I love my God?... Not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfillment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God. (*Confessions*, X, 6)

There is no doubt that a love like this will both will and do. But it is oh so much more than mere action and volition. When this inner delight in God is missing, what can the outer casing be but sounding brass or tinkling cymbal?